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AUTHOR	Kamler, Barbara; Thomson, Pat
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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the significant role that writing plays in research. It argues (using the form of 10 email conversations between the authors) that too often writing is oversimplified, consigned to the final "stage" of a research process and designated as "writing up." Research methodology texts and websites rarely discuss writing as integral to research practice. The advice postgraduate students receive not only glosses over the difficulties of constructing an extended argument but also of working within the genres and power relations of the academy. This paper interrogates the notion of "writing up" and its effects. It offers an alternative view of writing as research and research as writing. Contains 31 references. (Author/RS)

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Talking down 'writing up'

or

ten-emails make a conference paper

Associate Professor Barbara Kamler, PhD,

Deakin University

brk@deakin.edu.au

aka **B**

Associate Professor Pat Thomson, PhD,

University of South Australia

Pat.Thomson@unisa.edu.au

aka **P**

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B. Kamler

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Abstract: This paper addresses the significant role that writing plays in research. We argue that too often writing is oversimplified, consigned to the final 'stage' of a research process and designated as 'writing up.' Research methodology texts and websites rarely discuss writing as integral to research practice. The advice postgraduate students receive not only glosses over the difficulties of constructing an extended argument but also of working within the genres and power relations of the academy. In this paper we interrogate the notion of 'writing up' and its effects. We offer an alternative view of writing as research and research as writing.

Email #1

Dear B

I recently saw an interview with Tim Winton on *The 7 30 Report*. At one point he said "I write to understand what I think." I've remembered it despite the vicissitudes of menopausal memory because it equally applies, and so well, to research.

I wish that I could get across to some of our students that writing is a vital part of the research process. Not only do we keep notes, jot down ideas, record observations, transcribe interviews and so on as part of our research, but we are also at the same time making meaning through these various writings. Different writing techniques can be extremely helpful in interrogating our own positioned, habituated thoughts and practices. Then of course there are all of the public texts – conference papers, articles – and the thesis.

But what REALLY gets me going is when I hear the generally taken for granted phrase – 'writing up'. It is as if the research is somehow finished, and all that is required is to get it on the screen, on disc, on paper.

Writing a research text is itself part of the research, it's about crafting – if that means both a situated, fallible human practice of aesthetically manipulating language and a layout to create a representation, an approximation of a process of inquiry. It continues, as Tim Winton says, the thinking, and poses some new problems that require thinking about.

Whaddya reckon? Am I just being pedantic here? Is 'writing up' a perfectly acceptable phrase and "everybody knows what it means"?

Love P

Email #2

P

I reckon 'writing up' sucks. I've had a bad day and am grumpy from too many meetings where I've been talked at - but this writing up stuff makes me grumpier. I don't think we're being pedantic here. It's a phrase with a linguistic life of course – this use of the preposition **up** is curious don't you think? Why not **down** as in 'I'm writing down my PhD'. Better yet, why not omit the preposition altogether, as in 'I'm writing my PhD'.

But it's more than a phrase, I think, and we're not just being petty about words because it does embodied work on the whole PhD culture and carries a lot of baggage with it. It has material effects for sure.

Writing up implies a linear, staged process– first we do the research, then we write after we've figured it out, which as almost everyone in the social sciences knows, is not the way it happens. Your reference to Winton is great, writing research is an embodied way of thinking on paper and is continuous.

I hate 'writing up' because it makes the labour of writing invisible and hides the fact that it involves crafting words and ideas and identities. It implies a first draft mentality, the kind we buried years ago in debates about writing pedagogy in primary and secondary English. But it seems alive and well in tertiary postgraduate contexts. First we think, outline, get clear, then we write. How ridiculous!

'Writing up' also obscures the fluidity of writing – how hard it is to control sometimes – and its link to inquiry itself. It's not that we do the research and then know. It's that we know through writing and write our way to understanding through analysis. We put words on the page, see how they look and sound, and in the process write stuff we had no idea we were thinking before we started writing.

And last and certainly not least 'writing up' obscures all we've learned about writing as a representation. The fact that we are not just writing THE TRUTH, but a truth, a version. I was thinking about how often people say JUST when they say 'writing up' – 'Oh I'm just writing up.' There's no *just* about it. The findings are not already there waiting for the researcher to record, they are shaped and crafted by the writer/researcher through a million selections about what to include and exclude, foreground and background, cite and not cite.

So let's put it another way. How come we don't say 'I'm writing my research,' where the present continuous verb implies a continuous process of writing. And what if we thought of students as writers rather than novices who 'write up' what they've found?

Love B

Email #3

Hiya B

I like your suggestion of post-grads being already-writers. I wonder if the notion of apprenticeship is helpful here? If post-grads are already-writers and postgraduate research is an apprenticeship into the academy, it follows that post-grads must be apprenticed to research writers (that's us/them doctor persons). And what we/they research writers-teachers do and say will matter, because what we/they say and do is part of the old proximal zone thing.

I guess this is why I am getting my socks in a knot about 'writing up'.

I'm working at home today with one eye on the screen and another on my new pup, a seriously cute little number who is toilet training. I keep expecting another little doggy mess to appear any minute. I'm on the ready all the time to scold or, if I'm too late, to leap for the bucket and mop. I'm not sure who is training here, Megs or me! I am hoping that she'll get the habit of going outside before I get into the habit of taking her to the lawn every couple of hours just in case.

Without coming over all Pavlovian here, this does feel a little how I've got with the phrase 'writing up'. I've got one ear out for it all the time. I do therefore hear it all the time. A piece of me can't understand how it is that I seem to be the only one in the room flinching. It's just ubiquitous in almost any conversation about teaching postgraduates and doing our/their own research. I want to leap up with a metaphorical mop and bucket and wash it out of our/their collective pedagogic mouth. "Don't let our apprenticed already-writers pick up this habit!!" I say to myself. "Let's just send it out to some laboratory lawn somewhere else".

I am quite sure that the 'writing up' speakers don't actually believe that they have stopped thinking after they've finished their field work. And are there any people left who argue that language is a neutral transparent medium which just records something that has been 'found'? Yet both these things are implied in 'writing up' talk. We research/think/find and then we just do words about things we already know. Do we really want our postgrads to pick up these implied ideas as an habituated way of conceiving of research and the crafting of research texts?

What would it take to write off 'writing up'? How could we write around this topic in ways that are productive? And, will talking it down suffice? B, will the "Oh I mustn't do that here" be inevitably easier with a poodle than with the academy?

Now it's raining. Today I'm surrounded by puddles and messes! But, as Eeyore says, at least there's been no earthquakes yet.

xxP

Email #4

Dear P

This morning I was re-reading that article by Alison Lee (1998) 'Doctoral research as writing' –and was again bowled over by the sharp way she conceptualises the issues underlying our concerns with 'writing up.'

Alison cites a pivotal study on postgraduate failure by Torrance and Thomas (1994) which notes that students who delay completion or fail to complete their dissertation often do so because of writing-related issues. T & T (p. 107) say these students often seemed to see 'a strict demarcation between collecting data, or doing research, and the writing up of this material as a dissertation.' It is possible they suggest, that it was this perception itself that may have produced the problems.' (Lee, 1998, p. 123)

Ah well !!! No surprise to you or me but Torrance and Thomas were writing in 1994, Alison was writing in 1998 and here we are in 2001 still tyring to break open the discourse, without seeming pedantic.

Alison addresses some of the key absences: how most PhD discussion glosses over the 'profoundly textual nature of research'; how little attention is paid to the kinds of persons formed through the process of thesis writing or to the processes through which students learn to write and become authorised writers within their particular scholarly communities.

We offer no systematic instruction in high level writing for postgraduate students – our supervision practices rarely make explicit the complex rhetorical and scholarly devices used by different disciplinary communities – and there's very little research that opens out the complexity of PhD writing practices – Why? It may be because there is such an entrenched view of writing as marginal or ancillary to the real work of research and analysis – and one symptom of this is the entrenched use of WRITING UP.

Alison does some productive work with older literatures in composition studies and rhetorical theory from the 80s, such as Murray (1980) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) to highlight the centrality of writing to the production of knowledge. She blows the hell out of those naïve 'think-then-write' approaches which treat 'writing up' as a description of the knowledge produced elsewhere. As she says, such notions are 'both theoretically inaccurate when understood within the terms of contemporary theorising about language, and unhelpful in actually addressing what is at stake for students and their supervisors in the practice of constructing a thesis text' (p. 123).

But she also critiques the overly cognitive focus on the individual creative writer – evident in the process writing paradigm – for its failure to attend rigorously to questions of text. This is a crucial move for our argument too, P, don't you think? Like Alison, we want to bring contemporary understandings of writing as a social practice to the discussion of doctoral writing. We want to emphasise the highly specific institutional

location of the practices of research and writing. A focus on doctoral writing SKILLS is less useful than conceptualising doctoral writing as a social PRACTICE, which 'locates writers within scholarly and institutional communities within which they must construct and position themselves as legitimate knowers and text producers.' (p. 127). Amen sister!

What you think?

B.

Email #5

Gday B

You know, I never know what I think till I've consulted the literature – not. But I did think it might be a useful next step.

I've been going through my home library. The online bookshop truck seems to have delivered rather a lot of volumes devoted to writing and research over the last few years.

If I was to pile them into heaps, like kids do with found objects – all the X ones here and the Y ones there - I 'd find it difficult, because there aren't a simple set of categories that separate them all out. Nevertheless, I can see four broad groupings, although many in one heap take up in small ways issues and perspectives from the other three.

Here's my sorting.

First of all there's the **advice books.**

There are some directed at anxious postgraduates. These are, as reflexive modernity theorisations (see Giddens, 1991) suggest, a variant on the self-help mode. Given the increasingly perilous staff working conditions in most Australian universities, this may not be such a bad thing to have on hand!

The *Research Students Guide to Success* typifies one version of self help. The topics covered include: liaising with an institution, settling in as a new student, keeping records, producing reports, developing skills for creative thinking, producing your thesis and afterwards. Writing is discussed at various points throughout the text but always in terms of technique, and the emphasis is on tips ' that work'.

At a much more sophisticated level *Writing up qualitative research* is a narrative produced by an experienced researcher attempting to make 'transparent' the processes that he uses when writing. Again the emphasis is on technique so we have how to make a writing plan, and problems of sorting and organising data. But he doesn't just talk about producing the final text, he talks about writing all the way through the research process. There is keeping track of references, doing the "lit" review, making the link to theory and method, theory as narrative, revising and editing, running out of space, crowding more in, getting published… Now a lot of this is undoubtedly useful. Doing research does involve being organised, paying attention to scholarly conventions, being able to see the production of a thesis or book as a series of steps. Some of the advice is pointed and also not a little contentious/and or confronting. Take for example:

> Unless you write seamless prose, take a final look at your use of headings and subheadings and at the length of your paragraphs. Short sentences and short paragraphs make for comfortable reading, although academic authors are not inclined to write that way. If you can find no other basis for dividing up your long

> paragraphs into two or three shorter ones through efforts at editing, then be arbitrary about it. Give your readers a break by taking one yourself. There is no hard and fast rule, but in general, there ought to be at least two or three paragraph breaks on a standard 8 x 11.5 page (p.155)

I do actually recommend this book to people, even though I blanch at the title 'writing up' because it is a largely unpretentious demystification of some technical aspects of the writing process. A bit like Dr Spock (showing my age here B)– "Don't fuss, just put baby to bed and she'll be alright tomorrow" – but for already-writers lacking in confidence or know how.

Next are the **composition books**. There are an awful lot of North American texts in this heap B. Must be something to do with all those composition courses and composition departments in education faculties. They focus a lot on writing forms – genres, expression, literary leanings, arts-based texts. Many of these are constructed from/in/with a binary of content and form – and this group is all about form.

In this heap are:

1. the very personal. Take for example, Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul. This quartet specifically address the practice of composition. They suggest that writing is a process of making meaning and address a variety of types of writings that might be developed as research writing. Their discussion of the differences between descriptive and analytic modes, and the use of theory to tell a research story are helpful to postgraduate students early in their research. They talk about their support group and processes that they use to critically read each others' work, getting work published, and writing as self development – writing the unheroic self. So there is a combination here of theory, handy hints, and feminist politics. This is another book that we recommend to our students, for its readability and practicality, not its theoretical sophistication.
2. the very 'arty'. I picked up Rasberry's book because of the juicy title (sorry about that B) – *Writing research/researching writing*. He's onto it, I thought when I first got it. However, it is a book which is mainly about pedagogies of writing that have a poetic and literary sensibility – rather than also .. well, the kind of study that we might engage with, a study of language, representation, of knowledge construction institutionally-bound. But Rasberry is a fun read – with all of the wordplay we might expect from postie composition. Take this piece for example:

> Much of my own inner conflict – my dilemma of how to re-present a particular classroom practice – has im/balanced on the attraction/resistance of somehow creating a model of that practice (which most often risks mis-interpretation as a "model practice"). I dwelled, often, in a place of angst, worrying in/over the hyphenated spaces of my multiple roles as researcher and teacher and writer and student. Researcher-teacher-writer-student. This conflated identity which has been writing me as I have been writing it, has often left me feeling ill-suited and ambivalent towards the task of somehow….(p115)

You get the picture B.

Then there are the **text** books, those which theorise about, well, texts. These are a mixed lot, as auctioneers would say. At one extreme is Bal a literary theorist who delineates the elements of story, the structures of narratives. Perhaps Bakhtin is here too with his work on the heteroglossic nature of texts. Also Snyder whose work on hypertext resonates with our understandings of language as a medium of representation: she explicitly takes up the non-linearity of readers and reading, and of webbed hyper-linked texts.

The final group are those texts which we (B and P) would call **sociological** – for the want of anything better. This group begins by locating writing as a social practice which takes place in a particular time/place/tradition .

My personal fave is Geertz. Don't I just wish I could say something as elegantly caustic as this…

> What a proper ethnographer ought properly to be doing is going out to places, coming back with information about how people live there, and making that information available to the professional community in practical form, not lounging about in libraries reflecting on literary questions. Excessive concern, which in practice usually means nay concern at all, with how ethnographic texts are constructed seems like an unhealthy self absorption – time wasting at best, hypochondriacal at worst (p.1)

Anyway, enough already of the admiration for the finely honed phrase. This group takes up the notion that writing is integral to the research process, in and through which apprentices come to be officially recognised as legitimate knowledge producers and text creators . They position their discussions about research writing in context, speaking back to, and about, dominant scholarly traditions.

They situate their arguments both in terms of knowledge (epistemology) and ways of being in the academy (ontology).

They do not eschew technique, nor handy hints, nor literacy sensibility, but place these within a wider/deeper frame.

It is with this group B where our concern about writing up finds a home.

It's late. Nearly 11 pm and I have to get up tomorrow morning early to cancel a car service and rush into work to make photocopies. Back to the prosaic after a good night's sleep, I hope!

Love P

Email #6

Hey P

I think your division of the lit into four provisional categories is a useful first step to sorting through the kinds of paradigms at work here. We also recommend Ely et al (1997) to our students at Deakin but what about that book I took from your shelf last time by Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997)? Would you place it in your composition category or perhaps at the intersection of composition and the sociological? I've just finished reading it and am thinking about recommending it to students next year –it has the composing, crafting discourse and it keeps the focus writerly which I like, but it lacks the social practice emphasis we ascribe to, I think. So, yeah, I agree about feeling most at home with the sociological crew, but I'd want to augment this paradigm by using contemporary theorising on language as social practice, much as Alison Lee does. This lets us also emphasise our concern with questions of text and representation – the thesis as the production of an institutionally located text within a specialised discourse community.

As for me, while you've been sorting the lit, I've been wading through those websites we scavenged when I was last in SA – my memory is that we keyed in 'write up' and took stuff from those websites using the term. Well a small discovery here – most of the websites come from psychology departments in universities, so the term 'writing up' is firmly located in a scientific discourse and the phrase most often collocates with solution-type terms like 'results,' 'discoveries' as in *writing up research results, writing up research discoveries, writing up your work.*

There's also an interesting shift to the noun form on some websites where the action (*to write up*) becomes a thing (*a write up, a writing up period*), and once a thing it has a reality of its own, its' out there as an object to be dealt with (at the *Discourse on Discourse* conference I went to last week in Sydney, someone referred to this as the tyranny of the noun – maybe it was the kingdom of the noun). Curiously, once the term 'writing up' or 'write up' is used, I also noticed a definite absence of other writing terminology. So for example, I found terms like *clearly report, show, culminate, describe the findings, provide, present, show*, but these terms only signify an end stage presentation – so that the actual labour and crafting involved in writing still remains invisible. Very occasionally I found words like *proofread, check, edit, revise*, but again not with any of the complex understanding of how processes such as revision might help the writer develop knowledge rather than simply record it.

I'd say that the bulk of what I've read on these websites is framed much as your category one literature, as handy tips and advice about writing. But for the most part this advice is not terribly good or useful and indicates not even the most basic understanding of writing as it's developed since the 70s in both genre-based and process writing paradigms. Here's a typical, reductive tidbit:

> Ask yourself what would have been the perfect paper for you to have read in order to understand everything you need to know. Then write it…
>
> Papers must be understandable and meaningful. Papers are for replication and understanding…Each sentence must be as informative as possible. Include all relevant information. Never use anything you do not know is absolutely and totally real. Outline the paper until it is perfectly clear, then write it…'
>
> Http://www.jsu.edu.depar./psychology/sebac/fac-sch/rm/Ch4-5.html

Slightly more enlightened advice occurred on one website in relation to writing qualitative research:

> In one sense the division between analysis and writing up is a false one, in that analysis continues during the writing phase…There is more flexibility to writing up a qualitative study than a psychological experiment. This section points to some options.
>
> http://psych.uclalgary.ca/Course Notes/old/PSYC413/Assignments/writeup.html

but even here the 'writing up' terminology still thrives in a kind of contradictory fashion. Well so much for **www.writingup.com**. No recommendations to students here!

It may be that we need to argue that the term 'writing up' has no fixed meaning. Even if a person or a website or a book utters the word 'writing up' with the clear intent that this is meant to be a staged, sequential act, this may not be the meaning that is made of it. And because meanings are always made in context, there is work the term does. I don't want us to be misunderstood as simply being hung up on 'words' or implying that the meaning of 'writing up' is fixed.

No brains left today, I'm done.

B

Email #7

Wow B, this web stuff is fun. Absolutely agree with you about no fixed meanings. Don't want to end up arguing for another essentialism. But it's also not like it's open slather on meanings either. Some meanings are betterer than others Miss!!

I keep thinking of a workshop I did a few weeks ago for a school district leaders group. It was about narrative and identity and I think that many of them equated the notion of identity with self esteem. This was combined with a notion that identity was somehow to do with class, race and gender – so it was about knowing yourself as a woman or as an Aboriginal person, in some kind of essentialist way.

I found it quite difficult to establish identity as something always under construction, a continual and constrained negotiation among and within life worlds, that is held together as a story of a unified and logical self.

Rose and McClafferty in a recent *Ed Researcher* included identity in their discussion of postgraduate composition instruction I think. I remember I found that interesting at the time. I think the notion that academic writing *is* very strongly tied to the formation and negotiation of scholarly identity is very helpful. As I remember it they link this to citation practices too.

It is very easy to fall simply into a cynical view of citation as a boring and necessary convention of the academy. One interpretation of it is that it is a kind of ostentatious 'show' of reading – the scholarly equivalent of the male peacock strutting around with that preposterous and ostentatious tail fanned out. Plumage as performance. I think that there is something in that argument, otherwise why do some of us check the references at the end of articles after we have read the abstract. But I think that citation is more than that.

When you/we/I cite something you/we/I are making two identity moves:

1. You/we/I are saying that scholarly work is never that of an individual, it always builds on and uses others' work. Citation is thus a kind of 'paying your dues' and acknowledging how the scholarly identity being written is not the work of a solo, heroic author
2. You/we/I are also saying that we want to be with this crowd. Our 'place', our epistemological and ontological 'home' is at this point of time and in this piece of work, with *this* lot and not that. We locate ourselves by virtue of the literature we note, and through the theorisations we mobilise.

(That was all a bit Rasberry-like, but I hope you know what I'm getting at.)

More importantly, we are known in the academy and sometimes more widely, for our words/writings. Writing makes reputation, possible connections and networks, paves the way for further research and writing – it's not just about acquiring points in the quality

game. Research writing as a scholarly practice thus not only is integral to negotiating scholarly identity, it also opens up/closes down/shapes the trajectory of our scholarly identity. Writing is a kind of vector perhaps, one axis of identity construction.

I don't want to get too far into the business of identity here B. It's a tough concept with a lot of different theories whirling around it and a conversation about 'writing up' is not really the place. Suffice it to say that this whole area – writing and scholarly 'identification' – is a huge topic that requires not just a separate paper, but maybe even a whole book!

That's enough of it for now. Make the point and sign off. I love the curtness of email!

xx P

Email #3

Sweet P

Writing as 'one axis of identity construction' – this is a lofty phrase. But I agree, the identity stuff is crucial – it's absolutely central to the enterprise of research writing we want to develop.

Your discussion of citation practices reminds me that one reason it's so hard to work with PhD students on their lit reviews is because it's a site where they struggle with issues of power and identity. In order to write a lit review (or its more enlightened postmodern equivalent), PhD students need to situate themselves in a scholarly community(ies), see themselves as 'worthy' of being there and then find the courage to put their metaphorical hands on their hips and evaluate the work of well known scholars whom they admire or may be in awe of. To take up a discursive position as evaluator of those who are more experienced scholars in 'the field' is often intimidating – which is why students so often summarise literature in early drafts – rather than using it to build an argument.

Like you, I read Rose and McClafferty (2001) recently and also like the way they conceptualise dissertation writing as a primary site for scholarly identity formation. I agree with R & M that there's way too little professional discussion of what we can do to help our postgraduate students write more effectively. This is interesting, don't you think, given that the US has a long history of teaching composition in undergraduate programs, but evidently not postgraduate study. (We do neither in Oz!!!! This is a long-time gripe of mine as you know).

In the article they discuss the course Rose developed in professional writing with postgrads at UCLA to illustrate the possibilities. Rose comes out of a process and composition paradigm and this is evident in the way the course is structured as a writing workshop (Would you put Rose in your composition lit pile?)

Each week students bring 3-5 pages of their writing to the workshop, they distribute it to small groups or the group at large, read it aloud, give their assessment of it and then engage in discussion with peers and the instructor about it. Students range from first year to those writing their dissertations - this seems like a problem to me, not a benefit. They work in a wide variety of genres, from the class paper to the dissertation – this also seems problematic and might give students a less genre-specific and text-based focus than I'd be happy with. R & M say the topics of discussion range widely from issues of grammar and mechanics, to style and audience, to evidence and argumentation to research design and broad issues of conceptualisation. They see this as a strength – I'm not sure either way.

What might be useful for us to think about are the five aspects of Rose's pedagogy which they make visible and explicit – we can read these against our own conceptions of teaching research writing – what would we include or leave out as we move away from the diabolical 'writing up'?

1. listening to writing, crafting writing (writing as craftwork, something to work on and make more effective)
2. writing as method (the ways writing is central to inquiry and conceptualising)
3. audience awareness (who is the scholarly community students write for – where do they want to take the reader with their argument, how do they get them there?)
4. becoming a better reader of other people's writing (workshop as microcosm of ideal scholarly community, increasing the writer's skills in reading, response and improving others' writing)
5. the writing process as a process of scholarly identity formation

R & M say useful things about identity – but what bugs me is the way it becomes a flattened category like audience – one of 5 things that are attended to in the workshop. Surely it's far more central than this! How do we distinguish between producing a dissertation text and producing a scholarly identity?

To be fair, R & M say, 'We are taken by this coupling of writing and identity – by how many of the issues raised in the course, exchanges, and engagements with revision of text could be understood in terms of identity development.' (p. 31) But there is something here of the humanist concern for the individual writer and her voice and less for the kind of poststructuralist concern I have about the way writing itself shapes identities on the page and off. If we made the identity question more central to our postgraduate pedagogy, we could think of the writing workshop as a discursive space for working more playfully and explicitly with representations and identities – for the work I call elsewhere 'relocating the personal' (Kamler 2001) and you call here 'negotiating a scholarly identity'.

Love B

Email # 9

Dear B

I'm now at work and in between answering telephone calls from prospective students, I feel the need to try to summarise what I think we've said. Let me have a go and then you can add to it, change it, whatever…

We agree with Laurel Richardson when she says that researching is writing. Research writing is a particular institutionally constrained social practice: it is about meaning making

We want to emphasise that research writing is not the same as 'writing up'.

When people speak about research as '**writing up**', they usually mean the writing that they do **after** they have engaged in field work. But,

the activity of research is one that, from the outset, involves thinking, reading, listening, talking, and writing. Right from the time we begin to think about what questions we are interested in pursuing, we begin to write. We record the books we have read, we take notes from them, we keep a journal of our ideas, we have a folder full of pieces of jottings. As our research progresses, we write summaries of books we have read, short papers that put together some of the ideas with which we are working, notes that we can discuss with others and conference papers in which we put our ideas out into the public arena for the first time. Researching is writing

We develop our arguments and insights through **language**. Language is central to the production of knowledge (Lee 1998) but is not neutral. The research that we think, say and write is discursively constrained. Even if/as we tactically appropriate sedimented stories and alterative points of view in our writing, we turn them and ourselves to the work of being simultaneously produced as social subjects of discourses and subjectivities which can be 'spoken'. As we 'suture ourselves' into discourse and articulate our 'position' through writing, we are engaged in a process of identification – negotiating a scholarly identity.

As researchers, we can think of ourselves as writers. We can play with language and genre to create the kind of text that will communicate what we want. We can use metaphor, allegory, trope and other poetic tools to produce the story of our research in ways that engage the reader. All research, regardless of whether it is quantitative and experimental, ethnographic, case study or arts based, uses writing and creates a text. Some research communities have particular scholastic conventions such as use of the third person to narrate the story, and some research activities seem to lend themselves to a flat lexicon that gives an impression of facticity. But these are writing choices.

What is produced in research writing is a representation. What we have written is not what actually happened but a written approximation. This representation is not a 'reflection' of something that is out there – our writing does not function as a mirror. Rather, the writer imposes her/his view of reality through the writing process. We construct meaning through language systems which are based in our culture, place and time and by prevailing discourses, as well as through our own particular biography. This is not a private activity, but is social, since meanings and therefore representations are socially produced through us as researchers.

The writing representation is a text. The process of writing allows us to put our words out onto a page and thus to see them as separate from our 'self'. They are no longer just thoughts, but available, because we have created some distance between the thoughts and the page, for us to look at them critically. Researchers are writers producing texts than can be questioned and interrogated, just as you have asked questions of texts produced by researchers during the first course.

The choices of the writer, and her/his own experiences, ideas and positioning are inevitably involved in the text. There is no objective 'out there' to be found and written up. All our experiences and ideas are formed in language(s), in particular times and places. In order to do research as rigorously as we can, we need to interrogate our own texts, and to question the things that we take for granted. We also need to continue to work on how it is that our research is not only about our research question, but also about ourselves.

In arguing for writing research we are arguing for a combination of aesthetic judgements, technical virtuosity, epistemology - a particular research sensibility which goes beyond thinking of writing as mere description or composition, but as the research act itself.

Over to you B. What would you do with/to this list?

xx P

Email #10

Well P

Great summary. Really succinct and sharp. Surely this is an unbelievable way to write a conference paper, but I think we've arrived. There's a few things I'd add, though, or maybe just highlight. I'd want to put **scholarly identity formation** (or words to that effect) in **bold print** as a separate point that is foregrounded – not just backgrounded for all the reasons we've already discussed.

I'd also want to foreground the **genre** question – the location of this research writing as a particular kind of text that is constructed in particular institutional and cultural settings with particular conventions. So PhD writing is akin to other kinds of research writing but has a particular, receognisable shape, further differentiated by the specific demands of different disciplines. And what are we to make of the multitude of interdisciplinary texts being constructed all over the social sciences? Maybe my genre concern is already encompassed in your point about text, that what is created is a text that can be interrogated. But it may be useful to stress that these are discipline-specific texts – the creation of which demand the formation of discipline-specific scholarly identities, perhaps.

I also want to highlight that we are talking about **writing practices** and not just skills – and that advice and tips will not suffice as the genre we offer postgraduate students. Research writing involves a sophisticated set of social and writing practices. What is the pedagogy we need to develop in order to teach these practices? I'd make a plug here for Diana Leonard's new book *A Woman's Guide to Doctoral Studies,* because of its social practice orientation. Have you seen it yet? I don't think it was out when she was with you last week at UNISA. Although it's not writing-focused, it's the best of the advice genre, nuanced by feminist theorising, a thorough knowledge of the US, UK and Australian PhD literature, and a cross cultural concern to help students read the political and social cultures of universities to make sense of their work there.

As for writing practices, how will we differentiate the kinds of writing that are involved in what we call research writing? Certainly we have buried the 'writing up' practice for good, haven't we? But perhaps we need a new way of describing that part of the writing that signals to students that they are closer to the end than the beginning. I think students need to be able to say they are getting to the end, and maybe 'writing up' remains entrenched because it has done some of this 'finalising' work. So should we talk about writing chapters, crafting the thesis, chunking? New language to go with new ways of thinking about research writing.

I think we have the beginnings of a new book. What do you think?

B

Postscript

We began to write our conference paper as emails because we thought it would be good to perform live, as well as a way to take some shortcuts during the writing. Now that we are finished, we can see that we have learnt something by writing this. What we have is a representation of collaborative work in process. Researchers often do work together but what is most often seen is the final polished result of their efforts. Sometimes there are articles specifically generated about the process of writing together but these are rare (in fact one of the books we cited, Ely, Vinz et al do this). Our representation shows three important aspects of joint academic work:

(1) that writing takes place as part of everyday lives and must be sometimes be done after meetings, late at night, at home and at work

(2) that collaborating writers have relationships which are more than just about their academic work, but encompass domestic and other work issues

(3) that productive collaboration arises from play, including wordplay, and flourishes when writers give each other permission to be both serious and playful.

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